Supporting LGBT Lives: A Study of the Mental Health and Well-being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People

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Introduction

- There is a dearth of research on LGBT people in Ireland and stark gaps in knowledge and understanding of the issues and everyday experiences that impact on the mental health and psychological well-being of people who identify as LGBT.

- **This research set out to examine mental health and well-being among LGBT people in Ireland with specific attention to:**

  - The identification of experiences that heighten vulnerability to suicidal behaviour among LGBT people in Ireland, with special emphasis on young people.

  - The identification of experiences that strengthen resilience in the lives of LGBT people.

- A core aim of the study was to make policy, service delivery and practice recommendations related to mental health promotion and suicide prevention.

Method

The research adopted an exploratory multi-modal approach to the study of mental health and well-being among the LGBT adults and young people. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques was used. This involved the administration of a quantitative on-line survey, the conduct of a 'community assessment process' and the conduct of in-depth individual interviews with 40 individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Quantitative On-line Survey

This instrument included demographic variables, schooling experiences, perceptions of belonging, victimisation and harassment, workplace experiences, as well as general levels of verbal and physical abuse experienced etc. Rates and correlates of mental health functioning were also ascertained, including history of self-injurious behaviour and attempted suicide.

'Community Assessment Process'

This phase of the research was essentially one which sought to engage with a range of professionals across the LGBT community sector. A total of 14 interviews were conducted. The community assessment process facilitated entrée to field settings and helped to inform the sampling and recruitment of indepth interview respondents.

Qualitative In-depth Interviews

In a general sense, the interviews focused on the life 'stories' of LGBT people. Specific interview topics and questions targeted experiences that have been challenging, difficult or stressful. Questions also focussed, where relevant, on respondents' experience of depression, anxiety and loneliness. Other sections of the interview focussed strongly on positive experiences and protective factors.

THE SAMPLE

supporting LGBT lives

On-line Survey:

- 1,110 survey participants, aged 14-73 yrs
- National representation

In-depth Interviews with LGBT People

- 40 interviewees, aged 16-62 years.
- Focus on the life 'stories' of LGBT people

Findings

Minority Stress

- The study highlights minority stress as a significant feature of the lives of many LGBT people. Management of self was found to be highly necessary, but often 'routine' or 'normalised' for participants because of the pervasive nature of heterosexist messages in society.

Coming Out

- The period between the realisation of, and coming to terms with, one's own sexual orientation or transgender identity and coming out was experienced as difficult, daunting, and traumatic by a majority of participants.

> *"Basically what they said was that they wouldn't be happy but they wouldn't kick me out of the house type thing over it. But that doesn't seem to me very accepting of it. Oh we'll tolerate you but we don't really like you, as if it was some kind of personal choice"* (Gay, Male, 20).

LGBT Victimisation

- Eighty percent of online survey participants had experienced verbal insults because of their LGBT identification, with a quarter of all respondents reporting having experienced physical violence as a consequence of their LGBT identification.

- Two fifths of survey respondents had been threatened with physical violence because they were, or were thought to be LGBT.

Experiences at School

- 58% percent of the overall survey sample and half of all current school goers reported the existence of homophobic bullying in their schools.

- 40% of online survey participants indicated that they had been verbally threatened by fellow students because they were, or were thought to be LGBT, while 4% of the sample had been verbally threatened by staff.

> *"I felt extremely isolated in school due to my own awareness of my sexual orientation and a negative attitude toward/about homosexuality amongst my peers and teachers. There was very much a general attitude of intolerance and poor example setting from those in authority. I used to miss school frequently due to my feelings of isolation and eventually changed schools" (Gay, Male, 26).*

Mental Health Risks

Depression

- 86% of on-line survey participants and 90% of in-depth interview participants had experienced depression at some point in their lives.

- Over 60% of in-depth interview participants attributed the experience of depression directly to social and/or personal challenges connected with their LGBT identity.

Self-Harm

- 27% of online survey participants had self-harmed at least once, with close to 50% reporting 6 or more acts of self-harm.

- The most common forms of self-harm behaviour was self-injury in the form of cutting, scratching and self-hitting (80% of those who self-harmed).

- Average age of onset was 16 years and typically coincided with particularly difficult or painful periods linked to the struggle of coming to terms with one's sexual orientation.

> *"But other times it's like I'd kind of think I'd want to do it (self-harm). Then it would be in my head the whole day. Then I'd be like, I really want to do it. Then it's like, I'm not going to do it. It's like you have two people fighting in your head, 'I want to do it, no I'm not going to'. It just gets more and more, then gets to the stage where, fuck it, I've just done it. It's sometimes like an addiction almost"* (Lesbian, Female, 17).

Suicidality

- Almost a fifth of online survey respondents (17.7 %), and almost one third of in-depth interview participants had attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime.

- The average age at first attempted suicide amongst online survey participants was 17.46 years (with an age range of 8 to 42 years).

- A quarter of all female survey participants (n=89), compared with 15% of male participants (n =105) had attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime.

Resilience

- Four sources of social support were identified from the narratives of interview participants and the written accounts of survey participants: friends, family, LGBT community, and specific social environments such as school and the workplace.

- Support from friends was the strongest form of social support among the survey sample.

- There was strong evidence to suggest that resilience was ongoing and emerging rather than simply a trait possessed by some LGBT individuals and not by others.

> *"I am happy to conclude by saying that I am now a very content, confident, well-adjusted gay man, fully out and very happy to be gay. I have grown and thrived with the love and support of my friend and two of my sisters….Being gay was never my problem, but how to people react to me being gay was certainly part of what made life very hard in the past"* (Gay, Male, 35).

Conclusions

- **A majority of study participants had never contemplated, planned or attempted suicide, suggesting that LGBT people are not a homogenous 'at risk' group for suicidality, but that a significant minority of those who identify as LGBT are indeed at risk for suicidality.**

- **LGBT people in Ireland today are, on the whole, more happy than they are unhappy with their lives.**

- **The findings indicate that the psychological distress experienced by LGBT people were strongly associated with external stressors such as presumed heterosexuality, homophobia, prejudice and victimisation. Internal stressors were strongly associated with the anxiety of coming out.**

- **This is the first published study of its kind to be conducted in the Irish context, and it offers insights into the unique aspects of the context of being LGBT in Ireland. While highlighting the marginalisation, discrimination and inequality experienced by LGBT people precisely because of their minority status, it also sheds light on the positive dimensions of people's lives.**

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